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Chapter 10

“Is There Anybody There?”: Engaging With Open University Distance Learners

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ABSTRACT

The Open University (UK) Library supports its distance-learning students with interactive, real-time events on social media. In this chapter the authors take a case study approach and concentrate on the examples of Facebook and Livestream to illustrate how live engagement events on social media have helped to build communities of learners in spaces they already occupy, raise the visibility of the library’s services and resources with staff and students, and foster collaboration with other departments, while also being effective mechanisms for instruction. The chapter concludes with the library’s plans for the future and recommendations for other academic libraries wishing to run live engagement events on social media.

INTRODUCTION

The Open University UK (OUUK) is, in terms of student numbers, the largest academic institution in the United Kingdom (UK), and the UK’s only university dedicated to distance learning, with 174,000 students, most of whom are studying part-time. The vast majority of undergraduate qualifications have no prerequisite study requirements, which appeals to students who had poor experiences of secondary education, those who were not able to access higher education in early adulthood, or those who have disabilities that prevent them from studying on campus at a brick university (The Open University, 2018a).

The OUUK Library was set up at the same time as the university to support the research and teaching needs of academic staff on campus, with a physical building (shown in Figure 1) and print resources that only students who chose to travel to the campus could access. In addition to the physical library, an online library was launched in 2000. Prior to that time, OUUK students were provided with all of

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“Is There Anybody There?”

the content they needed to complete their studies via television and radio broadcasts, videos and DVDs, and printed module material; there was no requirement to search for external content, and therefore no tradition of academic library use.

As a digital institution, the OUUK uses a range of online platforms to connect with students. The virtual learning environment (VLE) is the main way to access module material, and Adobe Connect is used for tutorials. Livestream, a service that allows customers to broadcast live video content through the Internet, is also used, and the OUUK is active on social media in a number of ways. Facebook and Twitter are the most used social media platforms, and in addition to the institutional accounts, some of the faculties and support services – such as the Careers and Employability Service and the Library – have their own accounts. The Library was an early adopter of social media both within the institution and across the UK higher education sector, and has a culture of experimenting with online technologies in order to reach out to students. The main driver for this is to raise the visibility of the Library and offer support and teach library skills to students in the online spaces they occupy, such as Facebook. There is an additional institutional driver of building communities of students in order to combat the isolation of distance learning and improve retention and progression. An added benefit of being innovative in order to raise the visibility of the Library with students is that this also raises the Library’s profile across the institution and fosters collaboration with faculties and other professional service departments; indeed, the authors first met each other via working together on a Livestream event! Social media as a mechanism for teaching library skills is evidenced throughout this chapter; and the question about whether or not it is an effective one is identified as an area for potential future research.

The online library has opened up opportunities for embedding online library resources and information literacy skills into the OUUK curriculum. The authors touch on this aspect of the service, but the main focus of this chapter is on how the Library has had to think creatively in order to support and engage with students whose experience of the Library is as a virtual entity (if they are aware of its existence at all). It adopts a case study approach drawn from the OUUK Library’s use of Facebook and involvement with the institution’s Student Hub Live Livestream events, and addresses the following objectives:

- Reaching out to distance learners in spaces they occupy
- Building communities of learners
- Raising the visibility of the Library’s services and resources
- Fostering collaboration with other departments.

BACKGROUND

The Open University UK

The Open University UK (OUUK) is the leading expert in flexible higher education (www.open.ac.uk). The university is open to all and has a commitment to widening participation. This means that anyone can study an entry-level module. The student population is diverse: young, mature, full-time, part-time, UK-based and international students choose to study with the OUUK. The university is also the largest provider of higher education for people with disabilities (23,630 students declared a disability in 2016/17). The specific nature of part-time distance learning and the associated barriers were explored by Butcher (2015) and Butcher & Rose-Adams (2015). They found that the flexibility offered by distance

“Is There Anybody There?”

Figure 1. Library building at The Open University campus in Milton Keynes, UK

Source: Helen Clough



learning appeals in particular to those whose personal circumstances prevent any other mode of study, and therefore enables these excluded groups to access higher education.

The OUUK specialises in distance learning, and in addition to the printed and virtual module material supplied to them, students have access to synchronous online tutorials (delivered through Adobe Connect, at the time of writing) and also a range of online forums. Students are supported in their learning with personalized feedback from their tutor. While some modules have face-to-face residential events, the majority of students will never visit the university campus, and many will study alone. The impact of this largely isolated study, which requires motivation and self-discipline, is that many students do not learn about additional services or avenues of support such as the Library. Unlike students at a brick university, who can converse face-to-face with their peers before lectures, or have a spontaneous conversation with their lecturer or a librarian, OUUK students may not be in regular contact with other students or staff. When faced with challenges that impact on their study they can withdraw, interpreting the challenge as a failure on their part. However, many students face similar issues, so they can gain a sense of relief when they understand that they are not alone or unusual. For this reason, it is important that the OUUK facilitates communication networks for students who wish to actively engage with their peers. In addition to tutorials and forums, the OUUK has Facebook and Twitter accounts, and the Open University Students Association (OUSA) arranges physical and virtual events for students. There are also many student-initiated social media groups that are not moderated by the OUUK, which indicates that for some students, engaging with their peers is important.

Embedding Library Content and Skills Into the Curriculum

Since 2000 and the launch of the online library service to students, embedding online library resources and digital and information literacy (DIL) skills into OUUK modules and qualifications has been a stra-

“Is There Anybody There?”

tegic priority for the Library (Goodfellow & Reedy, 2014). To enable this, librarians work closely with the academics who write modules, identify suitable library resources, write skills activities, and refer to the DIL framework (Goodfellow & Reedy, 2012) when discussing learning design, assessment, and skills development. The DIL framework promotes skills that are embedded into the curriculum and are linked to assessment rather than ‘add-ons’ because most OUUK students have limited study time (76% of OUUK students work full or part-time during their studies) and, in common with students at other institutions, they are assessment driven (Gibbs, 2006).

The OUUK distance learning model involves the delivery of the majority of learning and teaching via the VLE, so the DIL skills teaching needs to be virtual too. There are two main types of skills activity: the first are DIL interventions (both asynchronous and synchronous), which are targeted at module or qualification level and the students encounter them as part of that week’s required activities. The second are generic, standalone materials that interested students can dip into. An example of the second type of resource is ‘Being digital’ (<http://www.open.ac.uk/libraryservices/beingdigital/>), an open-access collection of short, introductory level activities, loosely mapped to the DIL framework. The topics cover how to be effective online, including using social media.

The Library’s Live Engagement Team

As part of both the module-specific and the generic, standalone DIL skills resources, the Library’s Live Engagement team design and deliver synchronous online teaching events. During the team’s most recent peak period, from September until the end of December 2017, they delivered 62 synchronous online teaching sessions via Adobe Connect, with over 3,100 attendees in total. Most of these sessions were held in the evening or at weekends, and recordings were made available for those unable to attend live.

At this point it is worth explaining the background to the Live Engagement team, and how the establishment of this group freed up librarian resource for innovation. Previously the OUUK Library had a team of subject librarians, solely dedicated to a particular discipline, doing everything from working with modules to staffing the enquiry desk to online teaching. In 2015, in common with some other UK academic libraries such as the University of Manchester Library (Hoodless & Pinfield, 2016), the OUUK Library moved to functional, task-based teams in order to become more responsive and flexible in a rapidly changing higher education environment. At the time of writing, each librarian works within two or three of the four functional teams (Academic Liaison, Authoring, Enquiry Services, and Live Engagement), which enables teams and individuals to develop specialisms, and – particularly within the Live Engagement team – has freed up time and resource for experimenting with online technologies and new ways of engaging with the OUUK community.

There is evidence that the module-targeted live engagement events run via Adobe Connect can have a positive impact on the student experience and student success. For example, the introductory module in the Law qualification saw a 95% reduction in the number of student referrals to study skills support as a result of the Library’s help with referencing via a synchronous training session and asynchronous forum. The Live Engagement team felt that live events delivered via social media could also have a positive impact on student success by reaching out to a different audience, one that would not think to attend a library session, by delivering skills tuition in their preferred online spaces. The team were already actively monitoring the Library’s Facebook and Twitter accounts and answering queries from staff and students, as well as assisting the Library’s communications team by creating copy for social media campaigns, so running live events was the next logical step.

“Is There Anybody There?”

CASE STUDY 1: FACEBOOK

At the time of writing, two thirds of the UK population are active social media users, and Facebook is by far the leading social media platform, with 71% of the market share (Statista, 2018a and 2018b). There is no available data on how many OUUK students are active on Facebook, although the Open University Facebook group (which is a closed group) has 20,400 members as at mid-2018 and features multiple posts a day; some asking for help, advice and reassurance, and some celebrating success and achievement. The Live Engagement team are members of this group; they approached the moderators and asked to be added so that they could monitor posts and intervene if they felt they could offer advice about the Library. Many OUUK students are active on Facebook and they are also using it for peer support; gathering in groups to discuss their subjects and share study tips and advice. In a small student survey as part of an internal OUUK research project, 28 out of 141 students (20%) reported that they visited OUUK-related Facebook groups when studying (Ellis, E., Gallagher, A., & Peasgood, A., 2017).

One of the key pedagogic drivers for the use of new and emerging technologies at the OUUK is reducing the isolation felt by distance learners (The Open University, 2015). The hope is that by enabling and building active online communities of learners, and encouraging students to engage with and support their peers, there will be a reduction in the dropout rate.

There are examples across the university where staff are exploring the possibilities of social media in a distance learning context. Some of these were shared during an internal social media ‘Unconference’ event in 2017 where practitioners across the university, including the Library, shared their experiences and findings (The Open University, 2017). In a 2016 paper, OUUK researchers wrote about the ‘Friday Thinker’ where academics facilitate discussion with students on contemporary social science issues on the Faculty of Social Science’s Facebook page. They found that this approach made a contribution to overcoming isolation and creating an academic community of learners (Callaghan & Fribbance, 2016). Another approach piloted by the university in 2016 was using Twitter to supplement teaching on a large population science module. Initial analysis revealed a high level of engagement and positive qualitative feedback (Dresden & Hidalgo, 2017).

A review of the literature reveals that many academic libraries are using Facebook as a community building and information sharing tool. For example, an analysis of the social media postings at six academic libraries in the United States (US) revealed themes around community outreach and advocacy, providing an inviting environment, and access to content (Harrison, Burress, Velasquez, & Schreiner, 2017). However, there is a lack of literature around academic libraries engaging with Facebook as a platform for teaching. A report by Taylor & Francis in 2014 stated that the use of social media as a teaching and learning tool was not a high priority for librarians but was likely to be an emerging trend in the coming years (Taylor & Francis, 2014).

Within this wider institutional and professional setting, the Live Engagement team have used Facebook to teach DIL skills in two ways; they started off with real-time text chat events and then moved to video events when Facebook Live was launched.

Real-Time Text Chat Events on the Library’s Facebook Page

The Live Engagement team ran their first live text chat event on the OUUK Library’s Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/OULibrary/>) in March 2016. They chose to do a ‘Question and Answer’ (Q&A) session on referencing in response to the large number of students who contact the enquiry desk

“Is There Anybody There?”

for help with this topic. The event was run on a weekday evening because internal research showed that this is when OUUK students tend to study. The hour-long event was advertised as an opportunity to ask questions of librarians and an OUUK tutor. Involving a tutor in the delivery of the event added an academic perspective, and this cross-departmental collaboration remains important to the team because it is a great way to benefit from expertise in other departments while raising the internal visibility of the Live Engagement team and the Library’s services and resources.

The event was widely publicised to both staff and students on all available communication channels, including Twitter and Facebook, and the Library paid to boost the visibility and reach of the event on Facebook. In the days and weeks before the event the team kept posting to the event page. For example, each moderator introduced themselves and posted a picture. They also ran polls and asked students if they had any particular questions on the topic; this kept the event visible on Facebook news feeds. Students were encouraged to use the ‘Going’ or ‘Interested’ buttons for the event so that the Live Engagement team could gauge how popular it might be and therefore how many moderators were needed, and this also meant that students were reminded of the event on their Facebook news feed.

The event started with an icebreaker question (Figure 2) in order to get students feeling comfortable, remind them that they were talking to real people, and encourage them to talk to each other.

Five members of staff were involved in the event: four Live Engagement librarians and a tutor. There were three discussion threads posted 20 minutes apart, each containing different prompts, and each with a librarian or tutor assigned to moderate and respond to questions. The most recent thread was pinned so it appeared at the top of the page. The fourth librarian acted as overall moderator and time keeper. On reflection, this way of organizing the event over-complicated matters and people were posting all over the event page. The team kept back-channel communication open (in this case, Facebook’s messaging system) so they could talk to each other and assign questions, and had a back-up communication plan in case of technical problems.

Figure 2. Screenshot from a Facebook chat event on referencing, March 2016

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/events/511732965676869/>



“Is There Anybody There?”

277 individuals expressed an interest in attending, there were 403 live viewers, and 54 individuals posted to the page during the event, either asking questions or replying and conversing with others. An example of how these events can help to build communities of learners and counteract the isolation of being a distance learner can be seen in the following interaction: Student A asked the question ‘What is referencing?’ and a librarian replied with the official definition, but then Student B replied and the two students started chatting with each other:

Student B: *Good luck with your studies! What are you doing?*

Student A: *Health and social wbu! And thank you, this is my first year starting from September, so I’m kinda trying to get the background (Anonymous, personal communication, March 15, 2016)*

The students continued chatting in the thread, sharing their personal stories and learning journeys and offering encouragement:

I wonder where your journey will take you! all the best and don’t give up! (Anonymous, personal communication, March 15, 2016)

This thread ended with the two students agreeing to direct message each other.

The morning after the event a member of the Live Engagement team read through all the comments on the event page and responded to any that were missed or were posted after the event finished. The team also held a debrief session where they evaluated how it went and what they might do differently next time. It was agreed to keep the event page and discussion threads visible, so that those who were unable to attend or who found it difficult to follow live (like the following student) could refer back to it:

Thank you for this session. As a student studying for a qualification in online and distance education it is interesting to experience different learning environments! This one seems a reasonable way of meeting the needs of a lot of people at once, but hard to keep up with it all. At least the messages are all still here so we can go through them slowly at a later date. thanks again. (Anonymous, personal communication, March 15, 2016)

A week after the event, the ‘Insights’ tool on Facebook revealed that 8,600 individuals had been reached, 2,000 of these in the week following the event, which shows the value of keeping the page and discussion visible. It should be noted that the Library’s Facebook page is publicly accessible and so these events are available to all Facebook users, not just OUUK students. With over 25,000 followers this makes it a powerful tool for raising the visibility of the Library to potential students and throughout the higher education sector.

Since that first event, the Live Engagement team have run more text chat events on Facebook. Some of them were arranged to coincide with a calendar event. For example, the team ran a chat on ‘Preserving your digital identity over the festive season’ in December 2016, and gave tips on Facebook privacy settings and preventing everyone from seeing all of your Christmas party photos. Some were arranged due to an identified need, for example, the Library and the Disabled Students’ Group of the institution’s Students’ Association collaborated on an event in a closed group in order to raise the visibility of the Library’s services to disabled students. However, none of the subsequent text chat events has had the reach of the referencing event. This is most likely due to the nature of the topic, which is perennially

“Is There Anybody There?”

popular amongst OUUK students. On reflection, the team felt that the referencing event was slightly chaotic and difficult to manage due to the different threads and need to refresh the screen, and if they ran it again they would have only one discussion thread. However, the team also felt that it was incredibly rewarding to see evidence of students supporting and connecting with each other, which was also found during Student Hub Live events discussed later in this chapter.

Facebook Live Video Events

Facebook Live was launched to all users in April 2016 and the Live Engagement team were keen to experiment with the new tool. There are other social media platforms that offer live video, such as Periscope on Twitter, Instagram Stories, Snapchat and YouTube, but the Library had a large existing audience on Facebook and a tradition of using the platform for live teaching events, such as the referencing event. The team decided to run a 30-minute Q&A session on Facebook Live in December 2016. They set up the Facebook event page and promoted it as described previously for text chat events, but they also filmed and edited a 40-second trailer, put it on YouTube and used it heavily in promotion. At the time of writing, 20 months after the trailer was uploaded, there had been 1,400 views (The Open University Library, 2016).

On the day, they used a lapel microphone plugged into a mobile phone on a tripod, with one librarian in front of the camera and one librarian behind the camera. The librarian behind the camera controlled the recording, monitored the comments using a laptop, and relayed questions to the librarian on camera. There were also two other members of the team logged in remotely monitoring the event, relaying questions via the instant messaging back-channel and posting links. Figure 3 shows the behind the scenes technical set-up.

To ensure that the recording of the event was accessible to deaf and hard of hearing students and available to follow without sound, the Live Engagement team downloaded the video recording after the event and created captions and a transcript using Amara (<https://amara.org/en/>). The captions were added

Figure 3. Behind the scenes at a Facebook Live recording

Source: Helen Clough



“Is There Anybody There?”

to the Facebook recording and the video was also uploaded to YouTube for ease of sharing and embedding in the Library website (<http://www.open.ac.uk/library/training-and-events/facebook-live-events>). The event was watched live by 23 viewers, which was initially disappointing when compared with the 403 live viewers during the referencing chat event. This could have been due to the less specific nature of the topic, or the video medium. However, the team were encouraged by the engagement that happened after the event. At the time of writing, the recording of the event had received 264 views on Facebook and a further 121 on YouTube. One of the comments on the video provided qualitative evidence of the usefulness of the pilot to at least one student:

I watched this session the day after. Excellent presentation and so valuable for my next TMA² in A335 (Anonymous, personal communication, December 2, 2016)

The team were keen to build on the moderate success of the Q&A session and run a series of shorter live videos on a more engaging topic. Following the US presidential election in 2016, there was a lot written about the use of social media platforms to spread misinformation (for example, Lewis, 2016) and the role of librarians in teaching critical thinking skills and media literacy in order to increase awareness of ‘fake news’ (for example, Batchelor, 2017). In response to this, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) produced an infographic, ‘How to Spot Fake News’, with eight simple steps to evaluate news (IFLA, 2018). The Live Engagement team felt that this was an important and engaging topic, especially in the lead-up to the UK general election in June 2017. Therefore, in May 2017 they planned and delivered a series of 5-minute long Facebook Live videos on ‘fake news’, based around the IFLA infographic, and broadcast during Friday lunchtimes, branded as #FakeNewsFridays (The Open University Library, 2017).

There were four events, with a different librarian writing and rehearsing a short script to deliver live to camera on two of the eight IFLA steps. The technical set-up was exactly the same as the Q&A, with a mobile phone on a tripod and a librarian behind the camera pressing the record button. In a change from the previous Q&A, no interaction was invited from viewers during the live broadcast. On reflection, the team felt that while using Facebook Live enabled them to quickly create timely video assets that could be reused, the lack of live interaction and engagement with and between viewers was a disadvantage. As previously mentioned, one of the drivers of offering these outreach events on Facebook is to build communities and enable students to interact with staff and each other. In addition, due to the fact that the videos were live and done in one take, they were unpolished. The team felt that for standalone video assets it would be preferable to film multiple takes and edit them into a single, more polished asset using video editing software.

Despite the lack of live interaction, there was subsequent engagement after the event via views and shares on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. At the time of writing, the four videos had received over 1,000 views each on Facebook and hundreds more when they were uploaded to YouTube. The team attributed the popularity of these videos to the timely choice of topic. There was subsequent interest in these recordings from academics who wished to use them as standalone learning objects in teaching material.

After the #FakeNewsFriday events, the Live Engagement team reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of Facebook Live. The first advantage they identified was that it was a great tool for engaging students in an online space where they already were. At the OUUK there is some anecdotal evidence that students do not want staff infringing on their online spaces, so this use of Facebook Live could also be seen as a disadvantage. However, because most OUUK students will never visit the physical

“Is There Anybody There?”

library space on campus it is important that the Library is visible where the students gather online and is offering events on a platform they are comfortable and familiar with. As already mentioned earlier in this chapter, Facebook is by far the leading social media platform in the UK, so it makes sense to use it to engage with OUUK students and promote the Library to other potential learners too. When the team have run text chat events on Facebook, like the referencing event described previously, there have been a few negative comments from non-Facebook users about the choice of platform. One of the big advantages of Facebook Live is that someone without a Facebook account can view it via a direct link to the video. Finally, the team commented on how easy it was to film and quickly share the recording using a mobile device.

As previously stated, one of the unanticipated benefits of experimenting with Facebook Live and being an early adopter was the conversations it stimulated across the institution and the wider sector, raising the visibility of the Library and fostering collaboration. For example, the Live Engagement team were asked to cascade training on Facebook Live to the Careers and Employability Service, and one of the authors of this chapter co-wrote and delivered a workshop on Facebook Live at the Social Media in Higher Education conference with a senior lecturer who was also experimenting with using this tool with students.

CASE STUDY 2: STUDENT HUB LIVE

Student Hub Live has been effectively used by the Live Engagement team in two ways: to showcase the Library's services and resources to OUUK students, and to teach specific DIL skills such as referencing and evaluating information. The Live Engagement team have also benefitted from participating in live events, developing confidence at an individual level and also inspiring Live Engagement work in other formats such as Facebook. The nature of these Student Hub Live extracurricular events, which are both university driven and faculty specific, has enabled the Live Engagement team to collaborate with other areas of the institution, supporting discipline-specific activities and also filling DIL gaps that were not covered elsewhere. This section explains the platform and the Live Engagement team's use of it. The main kinds of event are considered in more detail, and the extent to which the Library sessions fit within the wider programme is discussed. The implications for the specific OUUK student demographic are addressed in the final part of this section.

Student Hub Live: Concept and Development

The Student Hub Live (<http://studenthublive.open.ac.uk>) is the OUUK's live, interactive online platform to support both students and staff in an academic community. The Student Hub Live (SHL) uses Livestream technology and synchronous digital interfaces to deliver learning to a wide audience who engage online in real-time. Instead of delivering lectures, which are often recorded or streamed using these kinds of technology in brick universities, SHL showcases OUUK content and staff in an accessible and informal way, always incorporating the voice of the audience. Using a 'breakfast TV' style approach to create engaging content that is both informative and fun, SHL broadcasts using Livestream from a studio on campus (shown in Figure 4). SHL was shortlisted in the Times Higher Education awards 2016 in the 'best support for students' category, and won the innovation category at the University Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) awards in 2018 (<https://www.uall.ac.uk/uall-awards-2018>).

“Is There Anybody There?”

Figure 4. The Student Hub Live studio

Source: The Open University, 2018



SHL was developed in 2014 to welcome new OUUK students to the university with orientation events, but has since developed to include skills sessions, dissemination of research and academic debate. SHL programmes on Livestream range in length from two hours to two days. ‘Sessions’ are parts of the overall programme on Livestream and are typically 25–60 minutes in length, depending on their objective. Student attendance at SHL events is optional and varies widely depending on promotion and marketing, and also the nature of the event. The ‘study skills bootcamps’ have been very effective, with approximately 2,000 students logging on to view before their modules start.

The events are made interactive through the use of a chat box, widgets (interactive voting tools) and also email and Twitter. The questions and feedback from the audience are fed into the discussion through the ‘hot desk’ (shown in Figure 5), a part of the set in the studio that is staffed by a range of students and members of staff. The chat box provides a very rich source of information that can be used to understand more about the experience of participation, and some of the quotations from the chat box are used in this chapter to support particular points that are made.

A catch-up service on YouTube is available for those unable to attend live, and, at the time of writing, the channel had 848 subscribers and 68,433 total views over the two-year period since it was set up.

SHL is a OUUK initiative that offers students an extracurricular space in order to engage in activities outside their modules. The scaffolding of academic community and the opportunity to take part in additional learning events is important for student success. Much research has found that students who engage in activities outside of the core requirements and who feel part of a community are more successful in their studies (Trowler, 2010).

This quotation from a student consultative forum sums up the value that participation in this event has for this student.

Finally, I wanted to say that I appreciate the work of Karen and Student Hub Live. Although it takes a light hearted approach at times, I really appreciate what SHL is trying to achieve. It is the only place

“Is There Anybody There?”

Figure 5. The ‘hot desk’ at SHL

Source: The Open University, 2018



where I can see and hear OU staff talking about their work in a meaningful way and giving people a chance to ask questions on the spot. SHL is a great opportunity to allay anxieties about study and provide interesting information about courses. Although it cannot replace the human contact of tutors and tutor groups - I can't emphasize enough how important real, human contact is to learning - but it does provide a window on the OU and OU study which is not otherwise available. (Anonymous, personal communication, date unknown)

While SHL is primarily for students, a secondary benefit is that it gives OUUK staff access to students in a way that was not possible beforehand, since many academics are not directly involved with face-to-face teaching. This not only offers an opportunity to connect with student concerns, but also provides an opportunity to deliver teaching in a very different format. The SHL team work with presenters to produce content that is inspirational, fun and engaging, and very often that means doing something that has not been done before.

Library Involvement in Student Hub Live

The Live Engagement team were involved early on in SHL, delivering sessions that raised awareness of Library services and resources and informing students about topical issues relating to DIL skills. For this chapter, the team were asked to reflect on their first experience of being on live camera for SHL. A common theme that emerged was being brave enough to try something new:

In my case it was just being brave the first time - it's always hard facing the unknown. The first SHL I was terrified...I felt like a rabbit in the headlights. After a bit I realised we were talking about stuff I knew...No session since has ever felt that terrifying! I would say once you get over the initial fear and being filmed is no longer an unknown, it becomes much easier. (Live Engagement librarian, personal communication, August, 2018)

“Is There Anybody There?”

The other themes that emerged were:

- Preparation; knowing the talking points and rehearsing
- Doing it regularly to build confidence
- Doing it in pairs in case one person dries up
- The importance of watching the recording on continuous improvement
- The importance of positive feedback from peers and managers in building confidence.

The team have delivered a range of sessions at SHL that can be broadly categorized into the following areas: what is an online library; referencing; online skills (including fake news, trust, and managing digital identity); and evaluation frameworks. Measuring the impact of these sessions is challenging because they are part of programmes that reach between 400 and 8,000 students, with durations of anywhere between two hours and two days. Many students log on to live events at times that suit their availability. However, it appears that some students do specifically log on with the aim of watching library sessions, as this student wrote when they logged on and the previous session was overrunning by two minutes:

I thought referencing was 14.30 - 15.00 did i miss this? (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2018)

Students who do not attend live events can watch recordings on catch-up, and the unique views from the YouTube channel at the time of writing show that of most interest is ‘Referencing’ (471 views), followed by ‘Managing your digital presence’ (242 views) and then ‘Evaluation Frameworks’ (194 views). While students enjoy learning about what the Library has to offer, the skills content appears to have most value to them. This is in keeping with the participation in the events overall, with the skills sessions attracting higher attendance both live and on catch-up.

The Live Engagement team arrange their own tie-in events to coincide with SHL and use their appearance on SHL as an opportunity to promote these. This cross-promotion works well:

‘Do you know if there will be a training session with the Library team soon? Before the courses start’ (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2018)

What Is an Online Library

General introductory ‘What is an online library’ sessions have been included in SHL programmes such as the Open Day (for new and prospective students), and the orientation events (for all new students). The purpose of these sessions was to showcase the resources and support that students could access from the Library. Many of these sessions have been delivered live; however, they have also been replayed in the non-live part of the programme, when the studio takes a break from livestreaming video but students can still talk to each other using the chat box. These sessions target new students, but many continuing students are not aware of the support that the Library offers, and so the secondary objective is to raise awareness of this.

“Is There Anybody There?”

Referencing

Referencing is a common concern for both new and continuing OUUK students. Despite some differences in certain discipline areas such as Law, the OUUK uses a version of Harvard referencing called OU Harvard. Internal research conducted by the Library found that many students struggle with knowing when to reference, and also how to apply this bespoke style. The referencing sessions that have been part of SHL programmes have been well received by students, and, as has previously been mentioned, feature most highly in terms of views on the YouTube channel.

Referencing sessions have been included in the ‘study skills bootcamps’ which prepare students for study, and they have also featured in specific skills programmes such as ‘Improving your study skills and academic practice event’ on February 2018. For some of these sessions the Live Engagement team designed and delivered the content in collaboration with academic colleagues.

Students appear to be enthusiastically engaged with the content:

‘Wow, would love to know some of those plagiarism stories’ (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2018)

During a discussion about common knowledge, students were engaged, reflecting on when they had not referenced because they thought something was common knowledge:

Something to take from that is if you’re not sure check with your tutor as I agree with you that common knowledge does vary from people to place to content and subject! Use your tutors folks. I say it’s always better to ask a silly question than make a silly mistake:) (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2018)

And many felt able to share their referencing concerns with other students:

No clue how to reference:/ (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2018)

i spending as long checking references than what i do on the essay lolol (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2018)

I have downloaded and printed all the info and examples from library but as i have a tracking issue, as in transferring info from paper to screen i tend to miss things (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2018)

Students responded with reassurance and were supportive of each other:

don’t worry, that’s about my extent of knowledge on referencing lol (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2018)

that’s where I get lost, but I agree with [panellist] if you’re unsure make sure to reference or just check with your tutor:) (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2018)

“Is There Anybody There?”

Asking for recommendations and sharing tips is a common activity at SHL events, and the Library sessions are no exception:

I understand referencing takes a lot of time so can we use an App to help? (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2018)

I use Zotero but you still need to check the reference generator to ensure it is correct style and all information has been added (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2018)

Online Skills

One of the most popular videos on catch-up is the ‘Managing your digital presence’ session, which focuses on digital literacy and the use of Facebook. As described previously, many students gather in groups on Facebook, and in this session, students discussed how to locate groups and also the benefits and pitfalls of belonging to such groups:

My Facebook module groups have kept me sane and made the experience a whole lot less lonely’ (Anonymous, personal communication, September 5, 2016)

Facebook groups have been so useful and you meet great people (Anonymous, personal communication, September 5, 2016)

Facebook groups for modules are a fantastic way of getting support as long as you don’t worry too much about people who are well ahead of you on the module. Just working at your own pace is the way to go (Anonymous, personal communication, September 5, 2016)

Based on the advice from the Live Engagement team, students also echoed where caution was necessary:

you should always be cautious with Facebook groups, people are not bound by OU computing conduct (Anonymous, personal communication, September 5, 2016)

Evaluation Frameworks

The Library recommends frameworks such as PROMPT (<http://www.open.ac.uk/libraryservices/being-digital/objects/87/index.htm>) and ‘Who, Why, When’ to students when they need to evaluate the extent to which material can be trusted. The Live Engagement team have developed a range of sessions using evaluation frameworks, and the most popular one was included in the critical thinking programme shown in Figure 6. Drawing on several ‘fake news’ stories they used frameworks to ascertain what could be trusted.

This went down very well with students who drew on their own examples of fake news stories:

Spinach and Popeye is an example. There was a ‘spinach mountain’ so the government promoted spinach, when other greens were equally nutritious (Anonymous, personal communication, September 19, 2016)

“Is There Anybody There?”

Figure 6. Live Engagement librarians talk about fake news in the SHL studio (The Open University, 2016)

Source: <https://youtu.be/QFR1UjV5kSE>



And also commented on the relevance of identifying untrustworthy sources based on their own experiences of media:

unfortunately that's how a lot of research is reported (Anonymous, personal communication, September 19, 2016)

Serious point - urban myths are perpetuated by other media who should know better. In Guardian there is increasing criticism from commentators that stories and opinion pieces are using Twitter feeds as source and reference. (Anonymous, personal communication, September 19, 2016)

Students also talked about how they evaluated information, echoing many of the key teaching points communicated by the Live Engagement team during the session.

It always helps to read the introduction to see whether the sources give relevant information for your topic (Anonymous, personal communication, September 19, 2016)

when I am getting sources of information from newspaper articles and magazines online, I always read information on the author who wrote the article and evaluate whether the information is useful for me (Anonymous, personal communication, September 19, 2016)

Benefits to the Library

SHL has provided another mechanism for the Live Engagement team to showcase Library services and resources to students and also to support DIL skills development through fun, interactive events that are popular with students. Additional benefits to the Library include increased visibility within the institu-

“Is There Anybody There?”

tion, which helps to raise awareness and foster collaboration. Indeed, this book chapter is an example of cross-departmental collaboration; the authors are a member of the Live Engagement team and the SHL project leader.

The Live Engagement team are also often asked to contribute to discussions about good academic practice, take part in an interactive panel quiz show, and develop specific sessions for particular cohorts of students, for example humanities students or postgraduates. The skills that they have developed in front of the camera and the knowledge that they have about students makes the Live Engagement team ideal participants; however, their willingness to collaborate and desire to constantly innovate is what is most appreciated by the SHL organisers.

In addition to the live content, the SHL team create short videos that are used as breaks between live sessions. The Live Engagement team has featured in several of these, including a tour of the Library. These videos are included within SHL programmes to raise awareness and have been useful assets that the Live Engagement team have used elsewhere on social media.

The Value of Extracurricular Events

OUUK students who attend live events like SHL appear to gain a lot from the experience; however, while this is one of only a few live events, it is one of many sources of information. Considering the care with which core skills are embedded into module content, and the range of information that is readily accessible to students, the question about why students would want to join or catch up on a live event highlights the value of these types of activity.

When considering some of the challenges that are encountered in part-time distance learning, it is unsurprising that students find value in talking to peers and members of staff in an informal way, and the expression of support from others has been evident in some of the quotes from the chat box. Students with busy lives and other responsibilities may not always be able to engage fully with their module material, and they may skip over certain activities that they consider either challenging or irrelevant. The high engagement with generic, skills-based content at SHL could indicate that students want to develop these skills, and that they require something in addition to the material they already have access to. Another explanation for the high viewing figures may be that students feel validated in attending events that are both fun and have a clear benefit to their study. However, although this explanation would hold for live events, it does not explain the high levels of catch-up viewing.

Students attend to learn, but also appear to find altruistic value in sharing ideas that have worked well for them – such as referencing tools and strategies – and they engage in sessions that have relevance and meaning to their lives. The Live Engagement team present the teaching points in an engaging way, and their examples are always topical. This is particularly important for live interactive events for two reasons: people will contribute when the discussion is meaningful and they feel able to add their own experiences and viewpoints, and participants can log off when they lose interest.

Discussions about digital presence, particularly regarding Facebook, have been useful in highlighting the benefits and limitations of these spaces, which are not all monitored by the OUUK. The strategy to acknowledge these spaces and use DIL skills to support students in them has meant that the Library is positioned as relevant and useful.

“Is There Anybody There?”

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Due to temporary resourcing issues in the 2017/18 academic year, the Live Engagement team had to put a hold on using Facebook for student engagement to concentrate on meeting existing module-targeted online teaching commitments. At the time of writing, the team are back to full strength and keen to continue running events on social media and experimenting with different platforms. Facebook use in the UK among those aged 16 to 24 years is decreasing in favour of other sites such as Instagram and Snapchat (Statista, 2018c). This indicates a need to investigate other social media platforms in order to stay ahead of the trend. Facebook will still remain a valuable platform for the Library, however, because the age demographic of OUUK students is wide and the median age of new undergraduate students is 28.

A lesson learned during past investigations into different social media sites is that the Library does not necessarily need to have a separate account on a platform in order to make an impact. In 2016 the Library partnered with the OUUK Communications team to run a pilot with the institution’s main Instagram account, providing regular content with the pre-agreed hashtag #OULibrary in order to create a library sub-community. It was judged to be a success by both departments due to the Communications team having a regular stream of content to post and the Library remaining visible on the main account without the pressure to maintain and monitor a separate channel (Bateman, 2017). This example of cross-departmental collaboration and resource sharing is something the Library is keen to continue.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the OUUK Library is gathering evidence of the impact of module-targeted online training sessions on the student experience and academic success. A future area of research may be to explore how live engagement with students on social media impacts on the student experience, and whether it is an effective instruction mechanism. This could be done via feedback surveys or by using the Library’s student panel (<http://www.open.ac.uk/library/library-information/library-services-student-panel>), which is made up of around 500 current OUUK students from a wide variety of backgrounds, ages and study levels who have been invited to be on the panel for one year and take part in research activities.

CONCLUSION

The OUUK Library uses various online platforms to teach digital and information literacy skills to the institution’s distance learners. The Live Engagement team have a particular remit for designing and delivering synchronous events and experimenting with new tools and platforms. The reason for experimenting with new platforms is in order to reach out to a different audience who might not think to attend a Library-branded session, delivering skills and raising the visibility of the Library’s services and resources in students’ preferred online spaces. The team have reflected on their experiences with Facebook and SHL and now plan their events around audience interaction, picking topics that will engage students and encourage communication and peer support. This contributes to the institutional driver to build communities of students in order to combat the isolation of distance learning and improve retention and progression. An added benefit of being innovative in order to increase the visibility of the Library with students is that this also raises the Library’s profile across the institution and fosters collaboration with faculties and other professional service departments.

“Is There Anybody There?”

To conclude, the authors recommend that other academic libraries who wish to use social media to hold live engagement events that build communities of distance learners consider the following steps:

- Choose an enticing topic with relevance to students’ studies. Think about:
 - Popular questions at the enquiry desk
 - What is in the news
 - What will help students save time and be more efficient.
- Choose a time of year and time of day that will have maximum impact.
- Choose a platform that allows for interaction both with the hosts/presenters and between the students.
- Promote the event heavily via relevant communication channels – but especially via social media – in order to be visible to the audience the event is trying to reach. Think about:
 - Producing audio-visual assets such as short trailers
 - Selling the benefits of attending by linking the topic to students’ study concerns
 - Paying to boost the visibility and reach of events on Facebook.
- Encourage interaction between students by having icebreaker questions/polls. For example:
 - What is the weather like where you are?
 - What are you studying?
 - How are you feeling today?
 - Where do you usually study? Why not post a picture?
- Prepare well. For text-based events, have pre-prepared responses to cut and paste. For video-based events, write a script, rehearse, and anticipate possible questions.
- Have a plan, but be flexible and allow for spontaneity.
- Make recordings of video events available afterwards and use in future promotional materials.
- Allow time and resource to make events accessible to disabled users. Consider having live captioning, or add captions and transcripts afterwards.

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ENDNOTES

¹ What about you?

² TMA is Tutor Marked Assignment and A335 is the code for an English Literature module.